



Walls of Rebellion: Graffiti as Counter-Culture

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Abstract— *Graffiti has evolved from acts of vandalism to expressions of cultural resistance and political commentary. As an art form and a social discourse, graffiti represents a counter-narrative to the dominant ideologies that shape urban spaces. This paper examines graffiti as a counter-cultural practice that challenges established structures of power, aesthetics, and spatial control. Drawing upon Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the study interprets graffiti as a tactical expression within the strategic systems of the city. By situating graffiti within the global, Indian, and Kerala contexts, the paper demonstrates how acts of wall writing, stenciling, and street art become everyday practices of resistance. Through theoretical frameworks of counterculture and resistance—drawing on thinkers such as Marcuse, Hebdige, Hall, and Lefebvre—this analysis positions graffiti as an evolving site of negotiation between the governed and the governing, the visible and the erased, the dominant and the subaltern.*



Keywords – Counter-Culture, Cultural Defiance, Political disruption, Street rebellion, Urban resistance.

I. INTRODUCTION

Urban spaces are repositories of power, identity, and memory. The walls, signboards, and public surfaces of a city are not merely structural components; they are semiotic terrains where ideologies are inscribed and contested. In this context, graffiti emerges as an alternative discourse that defies the sanitized, commodified, and regulated image of the city. Often dismissed as vandalism, graffiti resists the dominant narrative of urban order by reclaiming the walls as a site of expression for marginalized and voiceless communities.

The term *counterculture* refers to cultural movements that oppose or critique the values, norms, and ideologies of mainstream society. Graffiti, by virtue of its illegality and subversive content, becomes an emblematic countercultural form—speaking from the margins and against institutionalized power. In the modern city, where space is increasingly privatized and surveilled, graffiti performs a vital role in reasserting the “right to expression” in public space.

This paper seeks to analyze graffiti as a form of countercultural resistance through Michel de Certeau's theory of tactics and strategies. De Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life* conceptualizes how individuals navigate and subvert the systems imposed by institutions. Within this framework, graffiti is read as a tactical practice—a creative and transient act that reclaims the city's surfaces. The study begins by tracing the historical evolution of graffiti from its global emergence to its localized manifestations in India and Kerala, before moving to a theoretical discussion of counterculture and resistance.

II. THE EVOLUTION OF GRAFFITI: FROM GLOBAL TO LOCAL

2.1 Graffiti in the Global Context

The origins of graffiti are ancient, with inscriptions and wall markings discovered in Pompeii and ancient Egypt. However, modern graffiti as a political and cultural act emerged during the 1960s and 1970s in the United States, particularly in New York City. The era was defined by civil rights movements, youth rebellion, and anti-

establishment sentiments. Subway trains, alleyways, and city walls became the canvases of urban youth who sought to make their presence visible in a society that rendered them invisible.

Graffiti in this period symbolized both resistance and belonging. The act of writing one's tag or pseudonym on city surfaces was an assertion of identity in spaces dominated by corporate and state power. Over time, graffiti developed stylistically—migrating from tags to elaborate murals and political statements. European cities like Berlin, Paris, and London soon adopted graffiti as part of their countercultural ethos, particularly following events like May 1968 in France and the fall of the Berlin Wall. In these global urban landscapes, graffiti became intertwined with protest, freedom, and memory.

2.2 Graffiti in India

Graffiti in India functions as a potent visual language of resistance that cuts across political, gendered, and ecological struggles. It is often seen as an import from the West, essentially as a form of youthful expression giving voice to their spirit of rebellion generally experienced at their age.

During the Anti-CAA/NRC protests (2019–2020), the graffiti that emerged on the walls of Delhi's Jamia Millia Islamia and Shaheen Bagh turned ordinary public spaces into arenas of political articulation. Slogans such as "*We the People Resist*" and "*No NRC, No CAA*" blurred the boundaries between art and activism, reclaiming the wall as a democratic text. In regions like Kashmir and the Northeast, graffiti gains further subversive resonance—inscriptions of "*Azadi*" and "*Go India Go Back*" become recurring acts of defiance against state power. The cyclical erasure and rewriting of such slogans mirror the continuous negotiation between authority and dissent, making the wall itself a palimpsest of political memory. These practices exemplify Michel de Certeau's notion of "*tactics*"—ephemeral, everyday acts through which the powerless momentarily reclaim visibility within structures of dominance.

Parallel to these political interventions, feminist and environmental graffiti extend the scope of resistance beyond direct politics into the realms of social and ecological justice. Movements such as Shilo Shiv Suleman's *Fearless Collective* reimagine public walls as spaces of healing and empowerment, particularly after the Nirbhaya case, where murals celebrated women's resilience and bodily autonomy. Similarly, slogans from grassroots movements like *Why Loiter* and *Girls at Dhabas* inscribe the right of women to occupy and move freely within urban spaces, challenging patriarchal spatial codes. Environmental graffiti in Mumbai's Dharavi and

Goa's coastal belts critiques unchecked urbanization, pollution, and corporate greed, giving aesthetic form to ecological consciousness. Across these contexts, graffiti becomes an inclusive and spontaneous form of counter-discourse—an art of resistance that democratizes public space, translates collective anger into visual form, and transforms silence into speech.

2.3 Graffiti in Kerala

Among the prominent graffiti in Kerala are works by "Guess Who," in Kochi which appear to critique the organized festival Kochi Muziris Biennale. These works were a clever mash-up of Western pop culture with indigenous icons, influenced by British street artist, Banksy's style. Guess Who uses street art as a subversive medium of expression to practice and participate in the creation of an ever-changing culture of a city's visual landscape and experiment through ironic commentaries on social and political issues.

Guess Who represents a group of graffiti artists who doesn't wish to reveal their identity. They can connect and communicate with the image and subject while being scheming political. It is also about using public spaces as a platform to spread the foxy image of social issues prevalent in society. They use subversive tactics as potent means for speaking about realities of the society. For them it's an effort as a visual artist to start looking for new and meaningful ways to engage wider audience and inspire more people to take up this as a powerful medium of free expression.

The graffiti works of Guess Who artists shows a clash between Western culture and traditional ones. It acts as a mockery against authoritarian policies. Colonel Slanders, the founder of Kentucky Fried Chicken, flipping parottas; Che-Guera wearing a traditional Kerala attire with shirt and mundu; Marilyn Monroe holding an oil lamp etc. shows the influence of Western culture in India. Revolutionary political figures such as Karl Marx and Frederick Engels are portrayed as meditating on a tiger skin, representing the culmination of oriental philosophy with western ideologies. In some works, the evergreen actor of Malayalam cinema, Prem Nazir is depicted as James Bond holding a gun in one hand. The Lady in the famous painting Mona Lisa of Da-Vinci is sketched as a delicate pot bearing village belle. A classical Bharatanatyam girl with the attire of Michael Jackson and a modern Shakuntala wearing heels etc. shows a derision that is used to scorn the authority. A joker playing Ottamthullal with dollar in one hand and knife on the other shows the vital influence of Western ideologies and figures in molding the minds of common folks. All these graffiti works are purely intended as a reaction against the

organized festival that is marked by its postmodern integrity

A notable installation titled “Attention Please” extends the “Guess Who” graffiti from Kochi to Thiruvananthapuram. These pieces satirize the rule requiring moviegoers to stand for the national anthem in theaters. This regulation, passed by the Supreme Court, sparked serious debates at IFFK and among the public about whether nationalistic pride is infringing on civil liberties.

The “Attention Please” graffiti works seems to depict the influential film makers in the cinema history such as Alfred Hitchcock, Quentin Tarantino, Akira Kurosawa, Alejandro Gonzalez Inarritu and Ang Lee dressed in patriotic attires used by prominent Indian political figures. It drives the onlookers attention towards the pillars of Modern Cinema standing in attention for the Indian National Anthem. It was made to ridicule the regulation propagated by the authoritarian institutions to develop a false sense of nationalism. It is placed with a special note that “Attention: Everyone must respect this artwork”. This shows the invincible power formulated by the authority to exert control over the nationalistic pride of the citizen. It is a tactics that is used by the artists to express their thoughts freely to the audiences.

In Kerala, graffiti thus operates as both cultural memory and political performance, reflecting a state that has historically valued literacy, activism, and dissent.

III. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: COUNTERCULTURE AND RESISTANCE

3.1 The Concept of Counterculture

Counterculture, broadly defined, refers to cultural movements that reject or challenge dominant social values. Emerging prominently during the 1960s, countercultural theory aligns with the idea that art and expression can resist hegemonic control. Scholars from the Frankfurt School, the Birmingham School, and postmodern theory have examined how marginalized groups use symbolic forms to resist power.

3.2 Herbert Marcuse: Repressive Tolerance and Liberation

Herbert Marcuse viewed advanced capitalist societies as systems that create conformity through repressive tolerance—allowing limited dissent to maintain control. He argued that genuine resistance arises through aesthetic and imaginative forms that disrupt this one-dimensional order. Graffiti, as a non-institutional art form, becomes such an aesthetic refusal—a radical gesture of visibility

against the homogenized visual culture of advertisements and consumerism.

3.3 Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School: Subculture as Resistance

Stuart Hall and the Birmingham School theorized that subcultures produce semiotic resistance through symbolic practices. Just as punk or reggae cultures used fashion and music to signify dissent, graffiti writers use visual codes to reclaim voice and identity. The “encoding/decoding” model developed by Hall explains how graffiti encodes messages of resistance that are decoded differently by institutions (as disorder) and by subcultural communities (as empowerment).

3.4 Dick Hebdige: Style as Resistance

In *Subculture: The Meaning of Style*, Dick Hebdige argued that style itself is a form of protest. Through everyday symbols, subcultures create alternative meanings. Graffiti embodies this idea—its distinct fonts, colors, and anonymity function as visual acts of defiance. Hebdige also noted that subcultural styles are eventually commodified, a fate that graffiti encounters when it is absorbed into mainstream art markets or corporate branding.

3.5 Henri Lefebvre: The Production of Space

Henri Lefebvre’s theory asserts that space is socially produced and ideologically constructed. The urban environment is a product of capitalist power structures that determine who can occupy, design, or represent the city. Graffiti enacts Lefebvre’s “right to the city”—an attempt by ordinary citizens to rewrite spatial meaning. Each mark or mural is a reclaiming of visibility in spaces dominated by commercial imagery and surveillance.

3.6 Certeau’s Resistance and Everyday life

At the core of this study lies Michel de Certeau’s theory from *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984). De Certeau distinguishes between strategies—systems of control employed by institutions, such as governments and corporations—and tactics, which are the everyday maneuvers of individuals who lack structural power.

Graffiti exemplifies tactical creativity. The city’s strategic order—its laws, surveillance, and zoning—is momentarily subverted by the act of writing or painting. The graffiti artist operates within the cracks of control, using transient opportunities to assert presence. This aligns with de Certeau’s notion that everyday practices such as walking, speaking, or writing can become acts of resistance. Graffiti transforms these ordinary gestures into spatial speech acts, rewriting the city’s visual text.

IV. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION: GRAFFITI AS EVERYDAY RESISTANCE

4.1 Urban Space and Power

Urban spaces are strategic constructs—regulated through architecture, surveillance, and policy. Billboards, advertisements, and signboards dictate visual order, transforming the city into a site of consumption. Within such a framework, graffiti acts as counter-writing, inscribing alternative narratives that destabilize the official discourse. It turns walls into public texts of dissent, where power, identity, and creativity intersect.

4.2 Graffiti as a Tactical Practice

Drawing on de Certeau, graffiti functions as a tactic of occupation. Unlike institutional art displayed in galleries, graffiti is unsanctioned, ephemeral, and collective. Each act of writing is temporary—erased, repainted, or layered upon—yet it asserts autonomy in the fleeting moment of creation. This temporality is its strength: the resistance lies in repetition, not permanence.

In cities like Delhi, graffiti artists tactically use flyovers and metro pillars—spaces otherwise uninhabitable—to project voices of dissent. In Kerala, wall art near universities and social hubs becomes a tactic of reclaiming ideological space, expressing solidarity with feminist, environmental, and political causes.

4.3 The Kerala Experience: Manaveeyam Veedhi and Beyond

In Trivandrum's Manaveeyam Veedhi, the transformation of an ordinary street into a cultural corridor exemplifies the dialogic tension between state-endorsed art and spontaneous graffiti. While official murals reflect institutional narratives of civic beauty, informal graffiti often comments on gender rights, migration, and climate anxiety. Similarly, in Kochi, graffiti artists blend global street aesthetics with local symbols—creating hybrid forms that critique urban consumerism and tourism-led gentrification.

In Thrissur and Calicut, political graffiti continues to function as visual debate. The walls serve as democratic spaces where ideological differences are publicly performed. Each slogan and mural becomes a spatial argument, a material trace of Kerala's participatory culture.

4.4 The Paradox of Commodification

Despite its subversive potential, graffiti faces the paradox of institutional absorption. As cities begin to recognize graffiti's aesthetic and touristic value, it risks losing its oppositional edge. Murals commissioned by governments or festivals reframe resistance as decoration. Yet, even

within this domestication, spontaneous acts of wall writing persist, reminding us that counterculture continually renews itself in new forms and spaces.

V. CONCLUSION

Graffiti, as a visual and spatial practice, stands at the intersection of art, politics, and everyday life. It challenges the sanitized image of the city and asserts the presence of voices excluded from mainstream discourse. Through the theoretical lens of Michel de Certeau, graffiti emerges as a tactical practice of everyday resistance—a means of counterculture through which individuals navigate and momentarily subvert the strategies of power.

From New York subways to the walls of Kerala, graffiti's evolution reveals a persistent desire to reclaim visibility and agency. It embodies the principles of counterculture articulated by thinkers like Marcuse, Hall, and Lefebvre—celebrating creativity, dissent, and the right to the city. Even as graffiti oscillates between illegality and institutionalization, its essence lies in its ephemeral defiance.

Every mark on the wall becomes a statement of existence, a whisper against silence, and a declaration that the city belongs to all who inhabit it—not just those who plan it.

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